

# **WOMEN IN INDIA AND NEPAL**

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## GIRLS' PRE-PUBERTY RITES AMONGST THE NEWARS OF KATHMANDU VALLEY

Michael Allen

In this paper I describe two unusual rites performed by the Newars of Kathmandu Valley:<sup>1</sup> an elaborate two-day ceremony in which a large group of pre-pubertal girls are given in marriage to a non-mortal spouse, and the seclusion of girls in small groups in a dark room for eleven days shortly prior to menarche. The first rite falls into that general, though uncommon, class of mock-marriages of which are *tali*-tying ceremony of the Nayars of Kerala is the best known in the ethnographic literature; the second, which may be described provisionally as a mock-menstruation rite, is, so far as I am aware, unique to the Newars and Nayars. The problem that I am concerned with can be stated simply — why do these peoples have such rites and why do they differ from the more common ritual treatment of Hindu girls prior to the establishment of conjugal relations? I shall first give a brief outline of the principal similarities and differences between the orthodox ritual complex and the Newar/Nayar version. I shall then describe and analyse the Newar rites. In the final section I return to the comparative problem and put forward a number of explanatory hypotheses.

#### *The Brāhman pattern and the Newar/Nayar version*

The orthodox Brāhmanical pattern is one in which young girls are given in marriage with all Vedic ritual prior to first menstruation. The girls are usually secluded for three days at menarche and then a short while later initiated into sex with a consummation ceremony (Walker 1:250-1). This sequence is found only in elaborately caste-structured communities and is most fully developed in those orthodox castes deeply committed to Brāhmanical ideals of purity maintenance. In such communities the sexual and reproductive functions of women, though valued in terms of lineage continuity and size, are also devalued as antithetical to male ascetic ideals and the maintenance of purity. The solution to this apparent conflict of ideals lies in the doctrine of male control of female sexuality.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Transliteration*

All proper names begin with capital letters, and, with the exception of place names, include diacritical marks. All other foreign language words are in italics. Newari words are, when they first appear, marked 'New.'. With only a few exceptions all other italicised words are Sanskrit, most of them technical terms in common use amongst Newar ritual experts.



Providing such control is maintained then high value is accorded to women's reproductive capability. But outside the parameters of such control female sexuality is thought of as an explosive and dangerous force that may threaten the very fabric of the social system. It follows from this that an unmarried yet sexually mature girl is an anomaly to be avoided at all costs. A man who has failed to marry off his daughter prior to first menstruation is said to have committed the sin of embryo murder, and her presence in his household endangers the purity of all of its adult male residents. Hence the pre-pubertal marriage of girls must be understood as an institutionalised response to the dangers believed to be associated with reproductive sexuality outside the confines of marriage. This institution, in conjunction with the absolute control of sexually active women by their husbands, and the prohibition against widow re-marriage, ensure that men both gain access to and rigorously control female sexuality and reproductivity.

The Newars and the Nayars conform to this orthodox pattern to the extent that all girls are required to go through both a form of pre-pubertal marriage and a period of seclusion that has some connection with menarche. They differ in that the girls are not married to their future conjugal partners and the period of seclusion is prior to rather than at menarche. They also, and more importantly, differ in the extent of their departure from the other components of the restrictive Brāhmanical pattern, especially the ease with which post-pubertal conjugal relationships are dissolved, the high status and level of autonomy accorded to adult women, and the absence of any prohibition against widow re-marriage.

The similarities between the unorthodox marriage customs of these two widely separated peoples has been long known. Kirkpatrick, who visited Kathmandu over 180 years ago made the following brief comparison 'It is remarkable enough that the Newar women, like those among the Nair, may in fact, have as many husbands as they please, being at liberty to divorce them continually on the slightest pretence' (Kirkpatrick 1969:187). Hamilton, writing only a few years later, provided additional information.

The Newar women are never confined. At eight years of age, they are carried to a temple, and married, with the ceremonies usual among Hindus, to a fruit called Bel (Aegle Marmelos, Roxb.). When a girl arrives at the age of puberty her parents, with her consent, betroth her to some man of the same caste . . . (Hamilton 1971:42).

To those familiar with the Nayars the parallels are striking — instead of the usual orthodox Hindu child-marriage followed by a strict prohibition against divorce we find a ritually elaborate mock-marriage during childhood followed by the formation of easily dissolved post-pubertal conjugal relationships. In this paper I maintain that the two sets of unorthodox marriage customs must be understood by reference to a parallel structural departure from the ideal model of a Hindu caste system and its associated ideology of purity maintenance.

### *The Newars*

The Newars,<sup>3</sup> of whom there are today approximately a quarter of a million in Kathmandu valley and a further 200,000 scattered in other parts of Nepal, are the inheritors of an ancient and rich culture. They are, and have been for many hundreds of years, an essentially urban people, though with an economy in large measure based on rice cultivation. Prior to the Gorkha conquest of the valley in 1768 the three neighbouring cities of Kathmandu, Patan and Bhadgaon were the capitals of autonomous Newar kingdoms. Even today the populations of both Patan and Bhadgaon are almost entirely Newar.

Newari is an independent language with its own script and a rich literature. It belongs to the Himalayan group of the Tiberto-Himalayan branch of the Tibeto-Burman sub-family of languages. It seems likely that the earliest stratum of the Newar population may have come from Tibet and then over a long period evolved into its present form through the inter-mingling of immigrant peoples, including Indo-Aryans from the south.<sup>4</sup>

Historical research is in its infancy in Nepal and little is as yet known concerning the development of Newari culture and society. There are, however, good grounds for believing that the ancient Newars, like their fellow members of the Himalayan linguistic group, the Tamangs, Gurungs and Magars, were predominantly Buddhist in religion and tribal in social structure. The fertility of the valley and its strategic position for trade between India and Tibet led to the growth of major urban complexes and substantial political units. From a very early period immigrant Hindu dynasties, with their attendant Brāhman priests and untouchable service castes, have encapsulated the indigenous farmers, traders and artisans in a complex social system. As elsewhere in India, the inevitable result of such a process was the emergence of a caste-type social structure. While the immigrant groups became increasingly Newar in language and culture, the Newars themselves became increasingly Hindu in religion and internally stratified in conformity with caste principles. But whereas in most parts of India a similar historical development led to the loss both of tribal values and institutions and of the Buddhist religion, in Kathmandu valley two important factors, the proximity of the purely Buddhist Tibetans (and related Tibetan-type peoples within Nepal itself) and the minimal impact of Islam, prevented any such extreme development. Newar Buddhism, though it has undoubtedly suffered a steady decline in popularity through many centuries of Hindu political domination, especially during the past two hundred years of alien Gorkha rule, has nevertheless continued to be a major component in the complex religious beliefs and practices of the people. When Mahāyāna Buddhism was at its highest levels of development in north India just prior to the Moslem invasions of the eleventh and twelfth centuries the three cities of the valley, in particular Patan, were major monastic centres in regular communication with Nalanda and other great monastic universities of north and central India. But whereas the Moslem onslaught in



India led to the disappearance of Buddhism, in Kathmandu valley it instead led to its transformation into the non-monastic Tāntric form still dominant today.

The chief distinguishing feature of the Newar version of Vajrayāna Buddhism is the replacement of the usual Buddhist monastic and celibate religious virtuosi with an hereditary married priesthood. That such a transformation was an historic event is evident in that the contemporary priests and their families still own and mostly live in buildings which were clearly designed for monastic occupancy and are still known as *viḥāras* (*bahā* and *bahī* in Newari).<sup>5</sup> These priests have been accurately described by Greenwold (1974a) as Buddhist Brāhmins. Though they use Buddhist texts and symbols and refer exclusively to Buddhist deities, they are nevertheless like Brāhmins in three important respects — they constitute an hereditary and endogamous community whose members regard themselves as purer than all other Newar Buddhists, they have hereditary clients (*jajamān*) for whom they perform a wide range of ritual services, mostly of a purificatory kind, and they are the only Newar eligible for initiation into the most powerful Vajrayāna cults.

The historic importance of Buddhism in Newar society is evident in that even today there are about ten times as many Buddhist priests (Gubhāju) as there are Brāhmins (Deobhāju). The classification of the members of other castes as either Buddhist or Hindu has little meaning other than by reference to which kind of priest is employed for domestic purificatory rites. Traditionally, the numerically important Jyāpū agriculturalists are regarded as Buddhists, though today many of them employ Brāhmin priests. The latter, however, draw the bulk of their clients from the predominantly white-colour Śreṣṭha conglomerate.

#### *The ihi (New.) rite*

*Ihi*<sup>6</sup> is the most highly regarded and sacred of all Newar domestic rituals and the officiating priests are always either high-caste Buddhists (Gubhāju) or Brāhmins (Deobhāju). The rite is held whenever sponsors are prepared to meet the considerable expenses. Though a number of girls are always jointly initiated, the scale can vary from just a few closely related members of the same caste to as many as three or four hundred drawn from a wide range of castes. *Ihi* is usually held in conjunction with some other ceremony, such as an old-age ceremony, a stage in the sequence of marriage rites, the 'life-giving' ceremony for a new religious structure, monument or image, or the performance of the fire-offering ritual known as *yajña*. Frequently three or more of such events are simultaneously performed in a single complex ritual sequence. In the following account I rely on observations made at two Buddhist performances held in 1974, one in which twenty-four girls of Gubhāju and Śākya castes were initiated, and the other in which the sixteen girls were all of Gubhāju caste. The first ceremony was held in Khusibahī and the second in Kwābahā, both in Kathmandu.

#### *The first day (duśāla Kriyā)*

Early in the morning of the first day<sup>7</sup> the girls prepare at home with a purificatory bath and nail paring and then dress in smart new clothes and perhaps a few items of jewellery. From now until the end of the ceremony they must abstain from all *āme* (*āmis* — Nep.) food. *Āme* is a very broad category of food that is, from the orthodox Hindu point of view, impure (*asuddha*) and hence prohibited, but from the Tantric point of view is ritually prescribed (as in *pañcamakāra*). *Āme* food includes meat, fish, duck egg, tomato, brinjal, beancake, black lentil, ginger, garlic and onion — all of which figure prominently in the daily diet of most Newars. The girls assemble, each accompanied by a senior woman of the father's lineage, at the entrance to a previously purified courtyard<sup>8</sup> where the priests<sup>9</sup> have already begun the *yajña*<sup>10</sup> and other worshipping rites. One of the priests, assisted by his wife, meets the girls outside and after a series of purificatory rites<sup>11</sup> leads them in to their allotted places. They sit in a neat line around the edge of the courtyard with an elaborate array of ritual paraphernalia in front of each and either a paternal aunt or the mother nearby ready to help. The chief ritual items are a tray of standard *pūjā* objects (water, oil, flowers, seeds, curd and incense),<sup>12</sup> a beautifully painted clay bowl known either as *śalapā* (New.) or *ihipā* (New.) and a swastika *maṇḍala* drawn on the ground with white chalk.

#### *Purification*

Over the next couple of hours the girls' priest, with the help of his wife, takes the girls through a sequence of ritual actions the main import of which is purification — the five sacred products of the cow (*pañcagavya*),<sup>13</sup> the sacred water of the Vishnumati river, and various seeds and flower petals sprinkled over the head are all used to purify the body; a small rice moulded *caitya*<sup>14</sup> and a burning wick are carried around each girl in order both to remove all past sins and to show the way for the attainment of wisdom, and a variety of Vajrayāna *sūtras* are pronounced in order to effect mental purification. It should be noted here that despite the multiplicity of Hindu type purificatory ritual, the idiom is throughout quite explicitly Buddhist.<sup>15</sup> To give just one example I freely translate the final and most important *sūtra* of this initial purificatory sequence.

We girls, having been born after a long period of suffering, gather here and pray for the blessings of the Buddha, Dharma, Saṅgha Prajñāparamitā and Karuṇāmaya whose enlightened wisdom is in the form of the *sukundā* lamp here shown to us. To you we pay our humble homage, knowing that you are the *gurus* of men, gods and devils, highly revered by all. We pray for your presence in our *ihi* rite.



The *sūtras* are read in Sanskrit by the priest while he clangs his bell and his wife sprinkles uncooked rice, dried fruits and flower petals from a wooden pot over the heads of the girls. During this opening phase of the ceremony the girls themselves also worship Ganeśa, and their supreme guru, the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī.

#### The measurement

Thus far the rites have been standard purificatory and worshipping types found in a wide range of contexts. The second stage, the main event of the day, is quite specific to *ihī*. Each girl is carefully measured from head to toe with a six-stranded yellow thread which is then multiplied eighteen times (nine times from head to toe) making an auspicious total of 108 single-stranded body lengths. The thread (*sāt bhinna kā* – New.) is placed on the clay bowl (*solapā*) where it remains until the next day. According to one of my learned priest informants the thread represents Buddha's yellow cloth – and hence has clear purity or celibate overtones. Others referred to a story in which a Newar girl of Śankhu town once garlanded the prince to whom she was betrothed with the *kubha kā* which she was herself wearing at the time. In like manner, the girls in *ihī* will on the second day garland the *byā* fruit and then a short while later wear it themselves.<sup>16</sup>

When the girls are resealed the priest leads them in a worshipping ritual directed towards a beautiful gilt image of Suvarṇa Varṇa Kumāra, the golden bachelor son of Śiva who stands near the centre of the courtyard. With the priest reciting *mantras* and ringing his bell the girls throw rice, grain and flower petals towards the image. A short while later the day's events come to a close with much mutual blessing.

#### Second day

Once again the girls assemble outside the courtyard for initial purification (see Figs 1 & 2). But whereas on the previous day they simply wore good everyday clothes with perhaps a few items of jewelry, they now wear a much grander outfit consisting of red, purple or pink skirt, blouse and shawl (today often replaced by modern garments such as dresses or even slacks) and either gold or silver bangles, anklets and necklace. To complete the obviously bridal appearance the forehead should have a red *tikā*, and the eyes should be decorated with black soot (*aṇa* – New.).

After the usual opening sequence of purificatory and worshipping rites the girls are taken to the edge of the courtyard where each in turn uses her left foot to crush twenty-one black dall seeds (*mās*) with a small roller and board. The seeds represent past sinful actions and by so crushing them the girl has thereby morally purified herself. She now steps out of the sacred courtyard to a raised edge of neutral ritual status where she sits in front of a woman of the barbers' caste who cuts the toenails, washes the feet and then paints the toes with vermillion paint. The girl steps back into the courtyard where a male agnate gives her some holy water to wash her face and to sprinkle over her head. Thus thoroughly purified

butchers

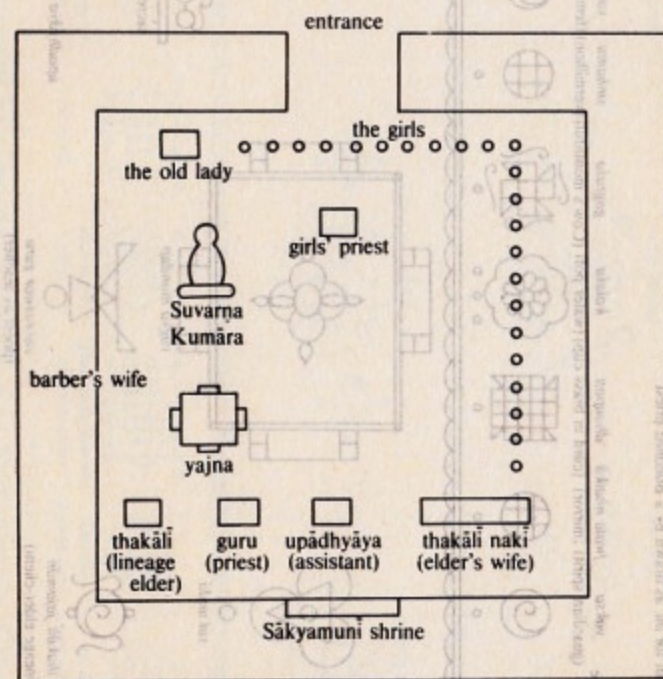


Figure 1 The field of action in Khusibahī for the second day of *ihī*, January 1973.



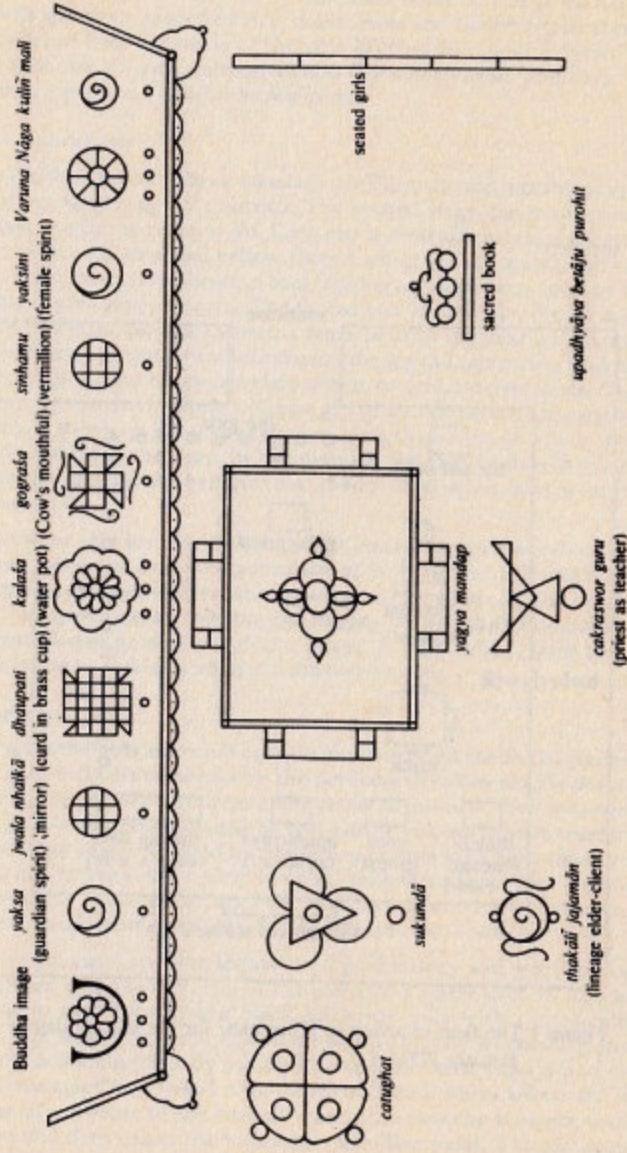
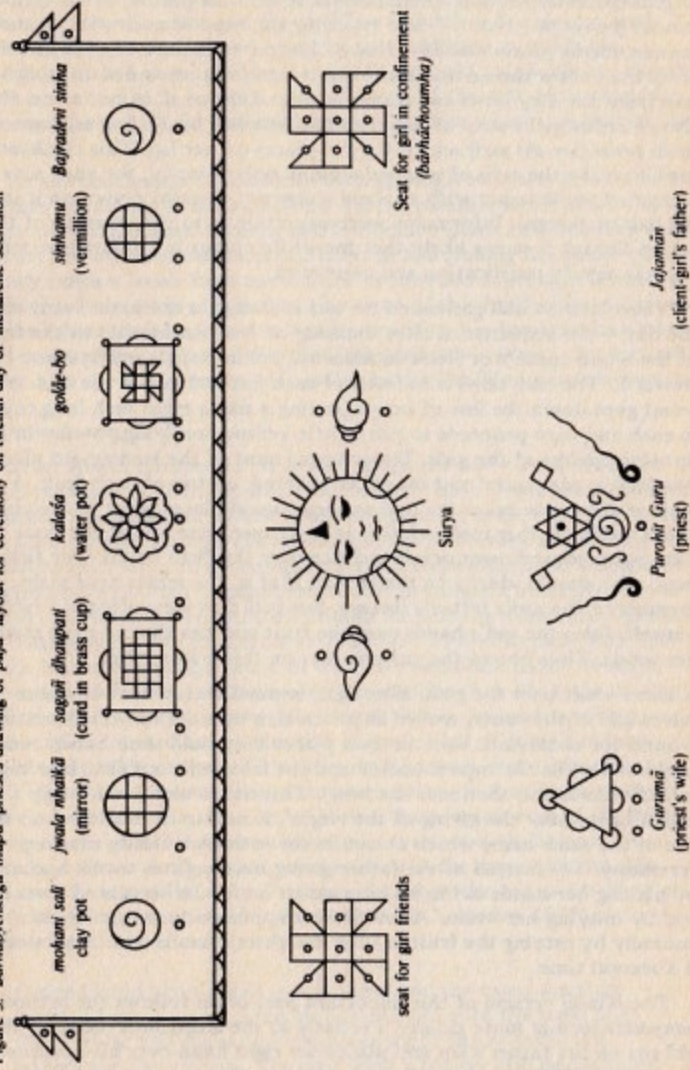
Figure 2. Pūjā layout for *ihā*, as drawn by a Buddhist priest

Figure 3. Bārūhāyēkēgū thapū-priest's drawing of pūjā layout for ceremony on twelfth day of menarche seclusion





she returns to her place. The *thakāli nakī* (New.), that is to day, the seniormost woman of the leading girl's lineage, now goes down the line of girls carefully rubbing vermilion paste into the parting of the hair (*sincho phayegu* – New.)<sup>17</sup> and touching the head of each with a small bronze mirror (*jiwala nhaikā* – New.). The paternal aunt of each girl then takes the yellow thread that had been so carefully measured the day before from the clay bowl and places it around the neck of her niece. She also gives the girl a strip of sari material (about 2 by 12 inches) known as *ihi prasi* (i.e. *ihi* sari) which the girl places on her lap. This cloth is used to make the saris of married women only. Finally, the aunt pins a piece of white paper with a sacred water pot (*kalaśa*) drawn on it in the hair of the girl. Informants were uncertain as to the meaning of this action though it seems likely that the white colour in conjunction with a *kalaśa* signify purification and constraint.

Thus purified and garlanded the girl is ready for the main event of the day – the sequence of rites focusing on her relationship to the fruit of the wood-apple tree (*bilva* in Sanskrit, *bel* in Nepali and *byā* in Newari). The clay bowl is in front of each girl and in it is the *byā*. A priest goes down the line of bowls placing a six to eight inch long rope in each and then proceeds to rub a little yellow purifying powder in the upturned palms of the girls. The paternal aunt of the leading girl places two leaves, one round and the other pointed, on top of each fruit. A male relative now takes the *byā* and leaves and places them in the girl's hands while another male relative adds a rupee note and at the same time pours some flower petals and rice over the girl's hands. The first man, who should ideally be the *thakāli*, that is, the seniormost male member of the girl's father's lineage, but is in fact very often the father himself, folds the girl's hands over the fruit and ties the red rope around her wrists. Thus bound the girl now sits on this man's knee.

A short while later the girls, after further purification both of themselves and of the route, are led in procession by their fathers three times around the courtyard. Back in their places they hold their hands over the clay bowl while the rope is untied and the fruit rolls out first into the father's hands and then into the bowl. This rite, which is curiously called *kanyāddān*, 'the giving of the virgin', is said to be modelled on the rite of the same name which occurs in the orthodox Hindu marriage ceremony. Yet instead of the father giving his daughter to the husband by placing her hands in his, he here assists her to be separated from the *byā* by untying her wrists. A few fathers appeared to recognise the anomaly by retying the fruit in their daughter's hands and then releasing it a second time.

The Hindu version of this important part of *ihi* follows the orthodox *kanyāddān* format more closely. Precisely at the auspicious moment the girl sits on her father's lap and places her right hand over his upturned right hand which is holding barley, *sinha* powder, sesame seeds and *kuśa* grass. The hands are held over a *pūjā* tray which contains a gold coin as icon of Suvarṇa Kumāra, while the girl's mother pours cow's

milk and the priest's wife pours water over the hands and onto the coin. The priest then announces the date and exact time of the marriage between Suvarṇa Kumāra and the girl. The father lets the sesame seed mixture drop from his hand onto the tray and then so holds his daughter's hand that he makes her touch the gold coin with her thumb. This act is explicitly equated with that part of the orthodox *kanyāddān* ceremony in which the father places his daughter's hand on that of the groom.

At the conclusion of *kanyāddān* each girl is given a new set of adult clothes consisting of sari and blouse by her parents. After this a chaotic scene of much mutual blessing and financial transactions between sponsors, priests and other workers ensues. Later in the evening the senior girl's family holds a lavish feast and a share of the food is brought home by each girl. Here she is required to give some of this food as formal *prasād* to her father, to bow down to him by touching her forehead to his feet and to pour him a glass of rice-distilled spirit (*ela* – New.). By each of these acts she expresses her new status in the family as a married woman.

#### *Ihi as a marriage rite*

Thus far I have referred to *ihi* as a marriage rite and clearly there are good reasons for so doing. Both the Sanskrit texts<sup>18</sup> and most informants describe it as such and indeed many insist that it is the only true marriage for a Newar girl. Though the rituals that are performed some years later, when couples enter into conjugal relations and establish an affinal connection between two lineages, are almost as complex and elaborate as those of orthodox Hindus, they seldom include the diacritical *kanyāddān* or 'virgin giving' rite (Bajracharya 1959:418-29 and Nepali 1965:198-231). It is only amongst some of the more orthodox Hindu Newars, especially those who are increasingly modelling their life-style on that of Parbatya Hindus, that *kanyāddān* is included in the marriage rites. Other *ihi* features clearly indicative of some kind of initiation into marriage include the use of a yellow neck garland, the parting of the girls' hair with red vermilion, the presentation of the girls in clothes, jewelry and make-up suitable for brides, the presentation of the *ihi* sari, and the girl's subsequent behaviour towards their fathers. The marriage theme is, of course, most evident in the *kanyāddān* rite. My research assistant, Rajendra Pradhan, described the *kanyāddān* scene at a Hindu *ihi* ceremony held in Kathmandu in February 1979 in the following words:

A hired band plays Hindi movie tunes and the usual marriage music. There is rather a festive atmosphere with the band and the laughter and jokes and the gossiping of the women, the fathers and the visitors. The girls seem a bit shy and embarrassed when they are told that they are going to be married... The *thakāli* (seniormost male) jokes with his ten year old granddaughter [who is sitting on his lap waiting for *kanyāddān* to begin] saying "you are going to be 'sent off' now".



If then *ihī* is a marriage, to whom is the girl married? Though many lay informants, especially the girls themselves, nominated the *byā*-fruit itself, others were of the opinion that the latter was simply a natural representation (*avyakta*, Skt. — a natural form which may represent a god) of a god. Though some said that the divine spouse was Nārāyaṇa, an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, most favoured a Śaivite interpretation by nominating Śiva's son Kumāra.<sup>19</sup> It will be remembered that throughout the two days of the ceremony a beautiful gilt image of a god occupied a focal position in the courtyard directly facing the three main priests. On a number of occasions he was worshipped both by the priests and by the girls, and towards the end of the second day everyone jointly worshipped him while holding a thread that ran from his hand around the courtyard. Though many participants could not name the image the priests, both Buddhist and Hindu, were unanimous in stating that he was Suvarṇa Kumāra. Kumāra is, of course, the eternal bachelor son of Śiva who is often represented as thoroughly disliking women — a seemingly curious husband for the daughters of Buddhist priests.

Yet on further reflection he is perhaps not such an odd choice. As a *rite de passage*, *ihī* marks the girl's transition from the status of unmarried virgin. Though now regarded as a married woman she has as yet neither menstruated nor entered into a conjugal relationship. She is, like the immature Brāhman bride, in a difficult liminal period. It might therefore be said that it is appropriate that she is here married to a supposedly celibate male god. Furthermore, neither she nor her spouse are without ambiguity in their relationship to sex. The girls, like the living Kumāri goddesses (Allen 1976a and 1976b), are required to wear red clothes, to have their hair parted with red vermillion and tied with red bows, and to have red toes and red *tikās* on their foreheads. As in so many Hindu cultures red represents life, sexuality and maternity whereas white and yellow represent celibacy, purity and control (Beck 1969:553-72). In day-to-day contexts it is only mature and reproductive women who wear red clothes. It should also be stressed that the representation of Kumāra as an asexual deity is inadequate. Like his father Śiva<sup>20</sup> he is ambivalent in his attitude for, though in some contexts represented as chaste, in others he is charged with a powerful eroticism and linked in divine coitus with his equally ambiguous female counterpart. He is also commonly known as Skanda, literally 'the spurt of semen'. I might add that the link between this god and the *byā*-fruit is quite explicit in Hindu iconography for throughout the sub-continent the *bīlva* (*byā*) is popularly associated with Śiva, and by extension other members of his family. Śiva's famous three-pronged staff is called the *bīlvadanda*, while the leaves of the tree are often laid on his heated phallic lingam to cool it (Liebert 1976:43).

When I asked informants why *ihī* is performed a few simply stated that it is necessary to protect the girls from various dangers, in particular the possibility of attack from malicious spirits. Others stated that the rite ensured that the girls would remain virgins until marriage and that they would then marry men as beautiful as Suvarṇa Kumāra. But by far the

most commonly given reason was to protect the girl from the awful stigma of widowhood. Because *ihī* links the girl in an eternal marriage with a god the death of her spouse does not in any way detract from her married status. In other words, just as she becomes a married woman prior to the establishment of human conjugal relations, so too she remains in that state after her mortal partner's death. Thus, the avoidance of widow status not only obviates the possibility of having to mount her deceased spouse's funeral pyre, but also provides a rationale both for divorce and widow re-marriage. As amongst the Nayars, and most probably wherever analogous mock-marriages are performed in India, Newar girls enter into the conjugal phase of their married lives at the post-menstrual stage. The average age for Newar girls at marriage is sixteen and there is good reason to believe that this is not just a modern development (Nepali 1965:239-50).

Some of the more scholarly pandits, both Buddhist and Hindu, are quite explicit in relating *ihī* to the orthodox Hindu custom of child marriage. Just as Hindu girls are given in marriage (*kanyādān*) prior to their first menstruation, so too in Newar society are girls required to have their *ihī* prior to menarche. But having thus drawn the parallel most then add that the Newars introduced *ihī* not just in imitation of Hindu custom, but in order to avoid what they regard as the undesirable features of Hindu marriage — especially the restrictions that are placed on the girl as regards choice of spouse and the prohibition against widow-remarriage. One Buddhist pandit stated that *ihī* is a *sankalpa*,<sup>21</sup> that is, a promise, on the part of the parents to marry their daughter. Because they have here given their consent, indeed literally 'given' their daughter to Suvarṇa Kumāra, the girl is now free to choose any boy she pleases. Furthermore, provided she identifies each of her subsequent spouses with Suvarṇa Kumāra by transferring the *byā* fruit from one to the other she has acted in conformity with the Hindu requirement of an indissoluble marriage tie. This same Buddhist informant insisted that *ihī* should not be regarded as evidence of spreading Hindu influence but rather as a clever Newar, especially Gubhāju, invention to permit the survival of traditional marriage customs whilst at the same time conforming, on the surface, to Hindu ideals. In support of this interpretation he pointed out, with apparent historical accuracy, that though the Hindu Newar priests, the Deobhāju, perform *ihī* for their clients, they themselves practised child-marriage until very recently. It was only when child-marriage was made illegal that the Deobhāju began also to perform *ihī* for their own daughters. In the earlier period they performed *ihī* for their clients simply because this was established Newar custom and if they had failed to do so they would have lost their clients to their Gubhāju competitors.

Thus far I have stressed that *ihī* is, like the *kanyādān* ceremony of orthodox Hindus, a *rite de passage* in which pre-menstrual virgins become married, though still virginal women. But *ihī* is a *rite de passage* in the very different context of caste membership. Whereas *kanyādān* marks, for the orthodox Hindu, the transfer of the girl from her fathers' lineage (and



caste, if different), to that of her husband, *ihī*, on the contrary, reaffirms the girl's ties with her father and confers on her full membership of his caste. Both Buddhist and Hindu informants specifically compared *ihī* with the important boys' initiation rite (*brata bandha* amongst Hindus and *bare chuyegu* [New.] amongst Buddhists) in which caste membership is conferred after a brief symbolic flirtation with an ascetic and renunciatory life-style. Hindu Newars refer to their version of the rite as *upanayana* (Skt.) — the classic twice-born rite that confers caste membership on all those entitled to wear the sacred thread. It is performance of this rite, and its equivalent amongst the Buddhist castes, that serves to differentiate between the lowly 'once born' castes and the superior 'twice born'. The rite confers caste membership in that it is only by participation that a boy ceases to be a Śūdra and becomes a 'twice born'. *Ihī* is said to be the girls' '*upanayana*': the girls too are transformed in this rite from the status of Śūdra to full membership of their fathers' caste. The most obvious indication of this change of status concerns commensality. Before *ihī* (or before *brata bandha* or *bare chuyegu* for boys) a girl can eat food cooked or touched by any 'clean' caste, but afterwards she has to observe the full rules observed by her fathers' caste. An equally important change occurs with death. If a girl should die before *ihī* (or a boy before *upanayana*) she would be carried to the cremation ground by hand, whereas after *ihī* she would be entitled to the use of the *kota*, a ceremonial bier. Similarly, whereas the relatives of a girl who died before *ihī* would be required to observe mourning for only four days, after *ihī* twelve days must be observed. A number of informants also told me that either during, or, as seems more likely, immediately after *ihī*, the girls are formally initiated into the worship of their fathers' *agan dya* (New.) and are given secret Tantric mantras — again paralleling the treatment of boys after their initiation.

*The mock first-menstruation rite (bārhā tayegu — New.)*

Just as orthodox Brāhmins insist that their daughters be given in marriage prior to menarche, so too do the Newars insist on the same for *ihī*. But whereas Brāhmins, in India as well as in Nepal, perform a first-menstrual rite when the actual physiological event occurs, the Newars prefer if possible to perform a group ceremony for a number of girls prior to puberty.<sup>22</sup> In other words, just as *ihī* may be described as a mock-marriage, so too is the *bārhā tayegu* a mock-menstruation rite.

A group of girls, always even in number and seldom more than about six to eight, are secluded in a darkened room in one of their homes for eleven days. Great care is taken to ensure that no ray of sunshine can enter the room for an explicit aim of the rite is to ensure that the girls are seen neither by men nor by the sun. The first three days are said to be especially dangerous, no doubt because this is the ritually prescribed period of bleeding throughout the Hindu world. They must not wash and should strictly avoid both salt and all *āme* food.

On the fourth day (some make it either the sixth or eighth) the *thākali nakī* brings a mixture of water, oil and barley flour (*ko cheka* — New.) which the girls then make into a paste and rub on their faces in order to clean and soften the skin. This is a sign of the girl's maturity. She also rubs some oil in her hair, but leaves it hanging down for it is only her future husband who can tie it into a bun on her marriage night. On this same fourth day many female friends and relatives of the girls come to visit them. The relatives, mostly married female kinswomen from both the father's and the mother's side, bring pure vegetarian delicacies, especially roast grains, a variety of beans and peas, bread, sweets, milk, curd and boiled rice. The friends, some of whom remain in the darkened room until the end of the seclusion period, make a small cotton effigy (*khyā* — New.) of a part-deity part-spirit and hang it on the wall where it remains for the next eight days. He is a rather mysterious dwarfed and pudgy white (some say black) figure with curly hair and red-pouting lips. The word *khyā* is a derivative of the Newari word *khiyuh* meaning darkness, and according to one informant he is white in colour in order to comfort the girls in the darkness of the room. Each day the girls must, before eating, make an offering to the *khyā* — an act which if omitted would seriously jeopardise their health. Some say that he provides the girls with companionship and amusement, others that he actually possesses them. Two young women told me that if he were not satisfied with his offerings he might get off his hook during the night and lie on top of the girls. In a story well known amongst Patan Buddhists the *khyā* is said to have originally been male but because he had sexual intercourse with the girls he is now female.

On the morning of the twelfth day the barber and his wife come to purify both the girls and the whole house. They scrub the house with a mixture of cow-dung and red soil and then sprinkle all rooms with the purifying water of a nearby river. The barber's wife removes the girls' dirty clothes, washes them and dresses them in red and embroidered saris with gold and red bangles and possibly other jewelry suitable for a bride. She also cuts their nails, paints their toes red and puts a red *tika* on their foreheads. Meanwhile her husband makes a small hole in the door to let in a tiny ray of sunlight. The girls see this, their first glimpse of Sūrya Nārāyaṇa,<sup>23</sup> and are then taken to the roof where the family *purohit*, together with their mothers, mothers' brothers, fathers' sisters and fathers await them. Their heads are covered with shawls so that they cannot see anyone. Their mothers help them to face towards the sun and then remove the shawls so that they are now 'showing their faces' to Sūrya Nārāyaṇa. The girls, fearing the power of the sun first look at its reflection in a basin of water before raising their eyes to look directly at it.

The priest now directs the girls to sit in front of an array of *pūjā* equipment, the centre piece of which is either a *maṇḍala* or an image of Sūrya Nārāyaṇa. The girls worship Sūrya Nārāyaṇa by offering flowers, water, *panca amrit*, *sinha* powder, fruit, seeds, lighted wicks



and, most importantly of all, a betel nut wrapped in a betel leaf. Each girl now kneels with her left knee on the ground and pours various purifying liquids from a small vagina shaped vessel (*arga*) over Sūrya Nārāyaṇa. By offering the nut and then performing *arga puja* the girl is said to be identifying with Gaurī (Pārvati) and thus acknowledging Sūrya Nārāyaṇa as her husband. The marital theme is made even clearer a short while later when the girl first puts vermilion on Sūrya Nārāyaṇa and then the *thakālī naki* marks the girls' forehead and hair parting with the red powder in exactly the same way as in *ihī* and in the subsequent marriage ceremony. Some informants stated that just as Suvarṇa Kumāra becomes the girls' first husband during *ihī*, so too does Sūrya become her second during *bārḥā*. Late that night a feast is held in which the girls eat *khaē sagan* (New.) (duck egg, fish, buffalo meat, beancake, alcohol) and are thereby freed from the salt and *āme* food taboos.

Much of the symbolism of *bārḥā* is clearly related to menstruation and the rite is indeed similar to that performed for high-caste Hindu girls in Kathmandu valley. But whereas the Hindus perform the rite separately for each girl when the menses occurs, the Newars perform a group rite prior to the actual event itself. In the case of the Hindus it is quite evident that the rite is performed to contain the awesome polluting properties of menstrual blood. In addition to the initial eleven-day seclusion a woman is isolated for three days every time she bleeds and she must scrupulously avoid any contact with men, the gods, water or cooking activities.<sup>24</sup> But in the Newar case the symbolism is less obvious. Despite the initial eleven-day seclusion and despite the purificatory role of the barber and the priest, the *bārḥā tayegu* is normally performed prior to the polluting event itself. The suspicion that the rite may really have little to do with menstruation is strengthened by the discovery that the Newars show little concern with a woman's subsequent menses. The only formal restriction is that she should have a bath before cooking and avoid the gods, including the household shrine. She is not secluded and she goes about her domestic tasks very much as usual. Though it seems likely that most men refrain from sexual intercourse there is no formal prohibition and little sense of danger.<sup>25</sup>

Why then do the Newars perform the rite? Though I will subsequently argue that *ihī* and *bārḥā* are alike in that while they seem to proclaim a concern with purity maintenance important features of the rites suggest that this is not a matter of much concern, the point I here wish to stress is that despite the overt connection with menarche *bārḥā* can be better understood as the second of a three-staged sequence of rites whose overall effect is to transform a pre-menstrual virgin into a married non-virgin. Whereas in *ihī* the young girl is symbolically initiated into the status of married pre-menstrual virgin, in *bārḥā* she is equally symbolically initiated into a condition of post-menstrual sexuality. All informants were agreed that the three central figures in *bārḥā* are the girls, the *khyā* and Sūrya. In the case of the *khyā* there is a strong possibility that he may deflower the girls. The case for ritual defloration by Sūrya is less

convincing though it should be remembered that when she is taken to the roof she is said to be 'shown to him' or 'given to him' or 'taken by him'.

If the Newar rites are in fact modelled on the orthodox Brāhmanical pattern then there is further indirect evidence for interpreting the *bārḥā* as a symbolic defloration. In those Brāhman castes where child marriage is practised, consummation should not take place until immediately after the first menstrual period. The girl is secluded for three days during which she should eat food that is free of jaggery and salt. She now takes a ritual bath and enters a seven or eight day period during which consummation must take place. According to most authorities the fourth is the best night for it is then that a son is most likely to be conceived. But some writers recommend a further seven days continence, a period during which the husband may, by gradual overtures, prepare his wife for the great event. The parallel with the Newar sequence is striking. In both cases the pre-menstrual virgin is given to her husband in the *kanyādān* ceremony. Again, in both cases the ritual treatment of first menstruation begins with a strict three-day period and is followed by a more relaxed longer period during which the girl loses her virginity. The only difference is that whereas the Brāhman girl is given to and deflowered by her mortal husband, the Newar girl is first given to a celibate god and is then deflowered by either an ugly effigy or the sun god.

#### *Yalman and the Indian mock-marriages*

Yalman, in discussing the Nayar *tali*-tying rites,<sup>26</sup> argues that these, like other mock-marriages in India, are best understood as functional alternatives to the more common Brāhmanical custom of pre-puberty marriage. They are, he contended, both to be understood as institutionalised responses to the Hindu pre-occupation with the maintenance of caste purity — a pre-occupation which 'narrows and focuses attention on a profound "danger" situation — the appearance of female sexuality' (Yalman 1963, 39). He argues, with considerable cogency, that in any hierarchically structured society in which purity is the idiom of status differentiation there is certain to be a major pre-occupation with the maintenance of female purity. This is especially so in India where the purity of the caste is a direct function of the purity of its womenfolk. In developing the argument he concentrates on the similarities between the two marriage complexes — and hence on the underlying similarities between the Nayers and their more orthodox Hindu neighbours.

Yalman's hypothesis is persuasive provided one accepts his contention that the Nayers, and other peoples with analogous marriage systems, are indeed as obsessed with the maintenance of female purity as he would have us believe. I think that there are good grounds for questioning that assertion. Apart from the Nayers and the Newars the main ethnographic examples of mock-marriages come from middle India where young pre-pubertal girls are married to arrows. Though the rite occurs across a wide spectrum of the social hierarchy, Dube (1953:25) notes that it



is especially common amongst tribal and low-caste peoples and never occurs amongst Brāhmins. Indeed, he explicitly associates the custom with a tribal preference for adult marriage and considerable laxity in sexual morality during adolescence. Presumably such laxity is but part of a more general tribal lack of concern for the preservation of female purity. An even more obvious link between mock-marriage and an absence of sexual orthodoxy can be seen in the widespread south Indian custom of marrying young girls to the resident deity of a temple prior to their embarking on a career of temple prostitution (Dumont 1961: 30 and 1964:85 and Walker 1968, 2:246-9). In all of these cases there would seem to be good grounds for asserting that the mock-marriages are performed in order to provide some kind of overt commitment to the orthodox Brāhmanical purity ideal prior to the establishment of unorthodox sexual relationships. In other words, I would not expect mock-marriages to occur in an isolated tribal community, but rather only where, as in middle India, the tribes are encapsulated in a larger caste-structured polity dominated by Brāhmins and Kṣatriyas. It is in such circumstances that one might expect the sort of compromise between conflicting values that seem to be represented in the simultaneous presence of mock pre-pubertal marriages and unorthodox adult sexual morality.

#### *The Nayars and the Newars*

The situation is, of course, much more complex when we turn to the highly sophisticated and caste-structured Nayars and Newars. Nevertheless, I think that striking similarities with the middle-Indian data can be shown to obtain. The first and most important point to make about the Nayars is that though they are part of a state-wide caste system that was famous throughout India for the rigidity with which inter-caste relations were controlled and regulated by reference to an elaborate ideology of purity and pollution, they themselves differed in many important respects from the non-Nayar Brāhman and untouchable castes. Despite the internal structuring of Nayar sub-groups in conformity with caste principles, and despite an evident concern with purity and pollution in such contexts as birth, menstruation and death, the Nayars were nevertheless famous for their many highly unorthodox social institutions, especially the extreme development of matriliney, the high status of women, and polyandry. To take but one example of the reaction of more puritanical outsiders I quote from a proclamation made by Tipu Sultan, the Muslim King of Mysore, in 1798:

and since it is a practise with you for one woman to associate with ten men, and leave your mother and sisters unconstrained in their obscene practises, and are thence all born in adultery, and are more shameless in your connections than the beasts in the fields: I hereby require you to forsake these sinful practices and live like the rest of mankind (quoted by Fuller 1976:4-5).

Though a somewhat radical moral evaluation the proclamation nevertheless suggests that Yalman's assumption that the Nayars shared their Brāhman neighbours concern for the protection of their womenfolk's purity as at best inadequate and at worst quite false. It is also worth stressing here that many commentators have remarked on the high status of Nayar women — high not only as regards conjugal freedom but also in reference to property inheritance (*ibid.*:6). I might add that Fuller (120) also stresses the lack of sexual orthodoxy in a system predicated on the desirability of regular sexual relations between high-caste males and low-caste females.

Yalman himself suggested that mock-marriages are more likely to be found than infant marriages in those societies where the conjugal relationship is relatively weakly defined. He had little difficulty in demonstrating that this hypothesis is supported by the data from the Malabar coast. At one extreme there are the highly elaborate mock-marriages of the south Nayars in association with a strong matrilineal organisation and weakly defined conjugal relationships — at the other end there is the Nambudiri Brāhman pattern of infant marriage, strong patriliney and indissoluble conjugal relationships. He nevertheless failed to perceive the relevance of such a difference for the possibility of parallel differences in the importance attached to female purity, especially in the sexual context.

I would like at this point to put particular emphasis on the fact that the Nayars are a people who have a strong sense of their historically unique culture — they see themselves as a homogeneous people encapsulated within a larger caste-structured social system. In so far as they are internally caste-structured, which they most certainly are, they see this as a consequence of their external relations with pure Brāhmins and impure untouchables. Though the early history of the Nayars is unknown I would dare to hazard a guess that like other matrilineal peoples in south Asia they were originally a tribal people. At some point in the development and expansion of caste-structured states on the Malabar coast the Nayars, like so many other tribal peoples in India, entered into the system primarily as mercenaries and to a lesser extent as peasant farmers. For a variety of historical reasons the militarisation of Nayar culture assumed unusual proportions, and as a consequence the pre-existing matrilineal organisation became accentuated rather than modified — and it should be noted here that numerous commentators have contended that there is a direct causal connection between the extreme matriliney and the extreme militarism of the Nayars. The matrilineal *taravad* system was incompatible with the orthodox Hindu emphasis on the sanctity and indissolubility of the marriage bond — yet as the centuries passed the Nayars became more and more an integral part of the Brāhman-dominated state-wide caste system and hence inevitably found themselves increasingly subscribing to the caste-linked ideology that focuses on the maintenance of female purity. I suggest that the *tali*-tying rite provided, as do all mock-marriages, an overt symbolic expression of such qualified commitment.



Let me return to the Newars. The first point to note is that despite the striking similarities between the *ihi* and the *tali*-tying rites the two social systems differ in some important ways. Instead of matriliney the Newars have a conventional patrilineal system with both lineages and patrilineal joint families. Furthermore, instead of polyandry we find monogamy and well-defined conjugal ties in the context of corporate and enduring family units. At a somewhat different level there is a marked contrast between the Nayar military tradition and the Newar emphasis on agriculture, trade and artisanship.

The Newars are, however, like the Nayars in at least three important respects; though internally structured in conformity with caste principles, outsiders nevertheless tend to regard them as constituting a single caste, they are unorthodox in their attitudes towards marriage and sex, and they accord a high status to women.

At the beginning of the paper I suggested that the historical evidence points to a remote tribal origin succeeded by a long period of monastic Buddhism inter-acting with orthodox Brāhmanism during which the foundations for a complex urban civilisation were laid. I also suggested that from a very early period the indigenous Newars were encapsulated in a complex caste structure with immigrant Brāhmins and Kṣatriyas at the top and unclean service castes at the bottom. As the political dominance of the Hindu dynasties increased so too did the pressures of conformity to caste structure and purity maintenance. As with the Nayars, the prevalence of inter-caste unions is almost certainly a consequence of the pressures for upward mobility in a fluid political context. Just as Sanskritisation flows downwards so too do successful men move upwards by contracting advantageous inter-caste marriages for their children.

Dumont, having noted the common high incidence of both hypergamy and anagamy amongst these two peoples went so far as to assert that their internal sub-divisions do not constitute true castes. He wrote:

In both cases we are confronted with an enormous conglomerate of groups distinguished by their profession, social status (and, among the Newar, even religion). Clearly these conglomerates are not castes, although they may appear as such in certain situations in relation to real outsider castes (Dumont 1964:98).

Though I think that Dumont is incorrect in stating that these sub-divisions are not castes, the fact that he put forward such a point of view is indicative of the extent to which both systems exhibit unorthodox features.<sup>27</sup> Rather than put both communities right outside the caste format I would prefer to regard them as exhibiting common structural and ideological deviations to a marked extent. After all, most peoples in India and Nepal were, if one could push history back far enough, tribal in origin, and most still retain marriage customs that depart in some way from Brāhmanical ideals. Nor would I regard hypergamy and anagamy as especially significant

indices of lack of orthodoxy. Though both certainly occur amongst the Newars, especially where rapidly changing political and economic circumstances have led to upward social mobility, they are not major features of the system. On the contrary, most marriages conform to the ideal of *jāt* endogamy. Furthermore, according to Dumont's own criteria both social systems conform to the caste model in that the various status sub-divisions are explicitly ranked by reference to an ideology of relative purity with priests at the top and untouchables at the bottom.

Whereas Dumont stressed the lack of orthodoxy in the kind of marriage alliances contracted, I would stress rather a more broadly-based departure from orthodox ideals in the evaluation of women and of female sexuality. According to the orthodox Hindu doctrine women are regarded as a major source of impurity — they menstruate, give birth to children and are subject to unclean desires and passions. Hence we find a strong emphasis on the maintenance of male control through such restrictive institutions as child marriage, *purdah*, a prohibition against both divorce and widow remarriage, and a high evaluation of *sati*. Female sexuality is regarded as a dangerous and polluting force that has value solely in the context of male agnatic continuity. But amongst both the Nayars and the Newars this whole complex of values and associated institutions is in large measure replaced by a much more positive set which focuses on the high status accorded to women. In the case of the Nayars this appears to have been a consequence of male absenteeism from home for military reasons. In the case of the Newars, who are neither matrilineal nor militaristic, the high status of women lies rather in their prominent participation in key areas of the economy.

Hamilton, after his brief account of the *ihi* ceremony, dwelt in some detail on the associated rights and freedoms exercised by women in their conjugal dealings with men:

Among the higher castes, it is required that girls should be chaste till they have been . . . betrothed; but in the lower castes, a girl, without scandal, may previously indulge any Hindu with her favours; and this licentiousness is considered a thing of no consequence. Whenever a woman pleases, she may leave her husband; and if, during her absence, she cohabit only with men of her own caste, or if a higher one, she may at any time return to her husband's house, and resume the command of his family. The only ceremony or intimation that is necessary, before she goes away, is her placing two betel-nuts on her bed. So long as a woman chooses to live with her husband, he cannot take another wife, until she becomes past child-bearing, but a man may take a second wife, when his first chooses to leave him, or when she grows old; and at all times he may keep as many concubines as he pleases. (Hamilton 1971:42).



Today, despite more than a century and a half of greatly increased pressures towards conformity to orthodox Hindu sexual morality, Newar women still retain their traditional rights to mock-marriage and elopement, ease of divorce and the re-marriage of widows. The move towards increased orthodoxy has, however, led to a decline in the actual extent to which women exercise these rights, especially those of elopement and divorce. Nepali noted that in a sample of 353 ever-married men and 381 ever-married women, only fifty-five men and fifty-four women had either divorced, deserted or been deserted by their first spouse. Furthermore, of the fifty-four women, only sixteen had initiated the separation (Nepali 1965:247-50).

The high status of Newar women, at least as compared with that found in more orthodox Hindu communities elsewhere in the Himalayas and north India, is evident not only in the context of marriage and divorce, but in a wide range of other areas of social and religious life. Sons, though perhaps slightly preferred to daughters, especially in the case of the first born child, are not accorded the exaggerated importance found in most Hindu communities. There is no evidence of female infanticide, either now or in the past, and the birth of a daughter is not in any way regretted. Girls are, indeed, very much honoured in their natal family and after they have taken their *ihī* they are granted membership of the father's caste (*jāt*) and admitted to the secret worship of his lineage deity (*dewali*). Despite the subsequent unambiguous transfer of allegiance and *dewali* worship to the husband's lineage, Newar married women nevertheless retain unusually important ties with their parents' close kin. All of the available married daughters of a locally anchored agnatic kin group are required on numerous occasions to fulfil important ritual functions. For every feast, ceremony and festival they should be invited and fed with ritually prescribed delicacies. They are also required to fulfil a series of ritual functions at all major *rites de passage*, especially death, affecting members of the father's family. Because most Newar marriages are contracted between families within easy visiting distance the majority of married daughters spend a great deal of their time fulfilling such duties in their parents' home.

The high status and important duties of married daughters are continued at the next generation level. A child spends a great deal of its time in its mother's brother's home 'where it is treated with unusual affection by the members of the family; and is allowed to enjoy liberty to a great extent' (Nepali 1965:419). The mother's brother figures prominently in most domestic rites and it seems that his importance, like that of other female-linked relatives, is thought of as a function of the power associated with female deities, and by extension, women in general.

The high status of Newar women is given cultural recognition in the popularity of Tantricism amongst both Buddhists and Hindus. Tantric doctrine and practice constitute quite explicit inversions of the ascetic values that underpin both Brāhmanism and monastic Buddhism.

Vajrayāna Buddhism, like the Hindu Tantra, is directly predicated on a positive evaluation of human sexuality as a source of ritual, meditative and cognitive power. Instead of the Brāhmanical rejection of sex as a major source of impurity, the Vajrayāna devotee celebrates coitus as a cosmic force of great generative power. In accordance with this doctrine the Vajrayāna priest, the Vajracārya or 'master of the thunderbolt', must be a married man. It is only thus that he can ensure the presence of his indispensable ritual partner — a woman who represents the power that is so vital for the success of his ritual objectives. The same doctrine underpins the requirement that the highest initiation (*dekha* — New.) for Newar Buddhists is available only to those who present themselves with a partner of the opposite sex.

As previously noted, the high status of Newar women is also evident in, if indeed not an actual consequence of, their prominent participation in important economic activities. This is especially true of rice cultivation and the spinning and weaving of cloth. Though the Newars, as an urban people, engage in numerous economic activities, the cultivation of rice is still by far the most important. The valley is highly fertile and with intensive irrigation, farmers can produce at least two rice crops a year. Men and women jointly participate in most stages of the cultivation cycle. Because the plough is strictly prohibited for religious reasons the earth is prepared for planting by the men turning it with digging sticks and the women breaking and levelling it with wooden pulverisers. The men then uproot the rice seedlings while the women replant them in the main fields. The transplanting is a major social occasion with very large parties of workers, often of mixed caste, moving from field to field. The women not only dominate the work, for which they get paid by the field owners, but also organise the midday feast of buffalo meat, flattened rice, and rice wine. These feasts are gay and popular occasions and no doubt contribute much to the prestige of the senior women. Later on at harvest time the work force is again equally male and female with the men mostly cutting and the women winnowing.

Another most important feature of the economy is the spinning and weaving of cloth. Prior to the introduction of imported cloth manufactured in India, the Newars produced sufficient material both for their own needs and for sale to other peoples resident in or near the valley. Both spinning and weaving are exclusively women's work and even today in sophisticated urban castes who purchase manufactured cloth, a spinning wheel is still an essential item in a girl's dowry.

The participation of women in other areas of the economy, such as trade, craftsmanship and metal-working, though less than in agriculture and weaving, is nevertheless considerable. It is, indeed, only in a few of the most orthodox Brāhman and Śreṣṭha families that some attempt is made to restrict the work of women to the domestic sphere. The more common pattern is for women to participate directly in important extra domestic activities and, perhaps as a consequence, to exercise unusual rights and privileges in the area of marriage and divorce. I have also suggested that



the popularity of Tantricism, both amongst Hindus and Buddhists, is predicated on the cult's high evaluation of female sexuality and the 'power' of women. In a similar manner, I interpret the importance accorded to both inter-personal and inter-group relations traced through women, as a consequence of their high status. As with the Nayers, this high status has effectively precluded the possibility of such restrictive institutions as child marriage, no divorce and widow immolation. Mock-marriages provide the ideal solution to the structural problems faced by these peoples.

### Conclusion

The range of world views found within the Indian tradition can, I think, be represented, without too much distortion, as falling between the two poles of world affirmation and world renunciation. On the one hand there are those values, philosophies and codes of behaviour predicated on a high evaluation of life and its generative powers, and hence of deep involvement in the affairs of man and nature; and on the other there are those values based on the assumption that the cycle of life and death is a hindrance to the realisation of salvation and hence that every effort must be made to achieve detachment and ultimately release from its bonds. It is not simply a matter of Hindu as against tribal, or high-caste as against low-caste, or even orthodox as against unorthodox Hindu, but rather that within orthodoxy itself there is a constant oscillation between the two world views. At the highest level the dialectic is dramatically represented in the relationship between the *dharma* of the King and the *dharma* of the Brāhman — between a code of ethics in which status is defined by reference to the politico-economic domain, and a code in which relative worth is calibrated solely by reference to purity and spirituality. The dialectic cuts even deeper than this for it internally pervades even those castes explicitly committed to only one set of values. For example, though Brāhmins are the foremost exponents of an ideology of renunciation and purity, they nevertheless perpetuate themselves in the worldly contexts of family, lineage and village. Hence, instead of adopting a life style of celibacy most Brāhmins marry, raise children and involve themselves generally in the politico-economic realm. Likewise, most low-caste peasants, in addition to placing high value on fertility, sexuality and productivity, also revere and make offerings to *sannyāsīs* and other renunciators who pass through the village. The dual presence of the two world views is, of course, most marked in the middle-ranking castes and least so at the two extremes.

At the beginning of the paper I argued that amongst those castes most fully committed to the ideology of purity, strong emphasis is placed on male control of female sexuality. Because castes are perpetuating lineage-based structures there can be no outright rejection of sexuality and reproductivity — on the contrary, high value is accorded to those women who maintain the lineage by producing male children. The solution to the problem of such control lies in the development of three institutions —

the betrothal of girls prior to first menstruation, the absolute control of sexually active women by their husbands, and the prohibition against widow re-marriage. The more any given community is caste-structured and the more any given caste subscribes to the purity ideal, the greater the probability that such restrictive institutions control the sexual life of women. Contrariwise, where commitment to this Brāhmanical ideal is least, as amongst tribal communities, many low castes and occasionally amongst unorthodox or reformist Hindu sects, one is more likely to find adult marriage, socially approved divorce and the re-marriage of widows. Though I cannot develop the argument here I would suggest that in such communities a strong emphasis on correct marriage replaces the Brāhmanical emphasis on early marriage. Hence in tribal communities it is common to find much stress laid on rules of exogamy and elaborate incest prohibitions.

When viewed in the light of these considerations the seemingly peculiar marriage institutions of the Nayar, the Newar and some middle Indian communities begin to make sense. The *tali*-tying and the *ihī* rites are seen by the people themselves as equivalent to the pre-pubertal virgin-giving rites of the Brāhmins. But instead of the girls subsequently entering into an indestructible conjugal relationship with the initial spouse, they establish as adults quite separate and easily dissolved secondary marriages. But bluntly — the mock-marriages may be said to constitute a formal show of commitment to orthodoxy in Brāhman dominated communities within which key values are still strongly unorthodox — especially as regards the status of women and female sexuality and reproductivity.

I would, however, be most reluctant to conclude my analysis on this seemingly 'rational' note. Rites seldom exist solely, or even primarily, to provide solutions or solve problems. Many rites, and this applies perhaps especially to *rites de passage*, have as their primary *raison d'être* their capacity to defuse dangers, to remove obstacles that stand in the way of desired goals. As I have argued elsewhere (Allen 1976:315), I agree with both Yalman (1963) and Gough (1955) in their depiction of the Nayar *tali*-tying rite as an institutionalised response to a profoundly felt danger that focuses on female sexuality. But I doubt if the danger lies, as Yalman contended, in the fear of pollution generated by the pubescent girl's approaching sexual maturity. Nor am I over-persuaded by Gough's ingenious hypothesis to the effect that the danger arises through the identification of a virgin girl with the incestuously desired and castrating mother. As I see it, the danger is simply that of uncontrolled female sexuality in a caste-structured community. The fear of either pollution or of castration by a fearful mother figure may, of course, in part explain why men should be so concerned to control female sexuality. They do not, however, adequately explain why such control is sometimes exercised through the child-marriage set of institutions and sometimes through the mock-marriage. Amongst the Nayars and Newars the danger of uncontrolled female sexuality has become highly concentrated on the immediate pre-pubescent period. The high status accorded to the women of these communities, in conjunction with



their relative freedom from constraint as adults, may well have exacerbated the anxieties of men about to establish conjugal relations. There are many features of both *ihi* and *barha* that suggest that it is only after the girl has been, as it were, defused by Suvarna Kumāra, by the *khyā* and by Sūrya Nārāyaṇa, that a man may safely establish conjugal relations. Put in slightly different terms one might say that the rites seem as much concerned with controlling a potentially dangerous, perhaps even destructive, force as with rendering the girls pure. If Dumont (1970: 48-9) is correct, as I believe he is, in contrasting a tribal concern with protection against danger with a caste concern with impurity, then here is further support for my contention that in the remote past both these peoples were tribal in social structure. It is only as a result of a very long history of gradual incorporation within developing caste-structured states that they have evolved such fascinating solutions to the conflicting sets of ideals regarding human sexuality that I have here delineated.

\* \* \* \*

### Notes

- 1 The research on which this paper is based was carried out in Kathmandu valley in 1973-74 and 1978-79. I am grateful to Sydney University, The Australian Research Grants Commission, the Myer Foundation and the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia for having financed the fieldwork. I am much indebted to the Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University for having assisted my research in many ways. My understanding of the rites discussed here was greatly facilitated through the scholarly advice of Asakaji Pandit, Manabajra Bajracharya, Badri Guraju and Nhuchhe Bahadur Bajracharya. I also learned much from the critical comments of Robert Levy and Geoffrey Samuel on early drafts of the paper. My greater debts, however, are to my colleague, Vivienne Kondos, who most generously gave me access to her fieldnotes on the Khusibahī *ihi*, and Rajendra Pradhan, who provided detailed descriptions of two Hindu *ihi* ceremonies performed in December 1978 and January 1979.
- 2 *The Laws of Manu*, IX, 2-3 spell this out clearly — 'Day and night women must be kept in dependence by the males [of] their [families], and if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments, they must be kept under control. Her father protects [her] in childhood, her husband protects [her] in youth, and her sons protect [her] in old age; a woman is never fit for independence' (Buhler 1969:327-8).
- 3 For background anthropological information on the Newars see Allen (1973, 1975 and 1976), Furer-Haimendorf (1956 and 1964), Greenwold (1974a and 1974b), Hodgson (1874), Lévi (1908), Nepali (1965), Rosser (1966), Sharma (1973) and Toffin (1975, and 1976).

- 4 See Doherty (1978) and Malla (1973:106-7) for more detailed discussions of the relation between Newari and other Himalayan languages.
- 5 See Allen 1973:6-10 for further details.
- 6 The only other published description of *ihi* is in Nepali (1965:106-11). Though there is a broad pattern of similarity between our two descriptions, there are some differences in detail. I would attribute many of these to the fact that whereas my informants were Buddhists, Nepali's were almost certainly Hindus.
- 7 The rites held on the first day of the boys' initiation are also referred to as the *duśāla kriyā* — the preparatory rites (Locke 1975:4).
- 8 When the senior girl is the daughter of either a Gubhāju or Śākya the courtyard will be located in either a *bahā* or *bahf*. For lower-ranking Buddhist castes any courtyard that contains a *cāitya* is suitable while for Hindu castes the rite is either small in scale and performed in a domestic courtyard or in front of a Ganeśa temple.
- 9 Throughout the two days three elderly Gubhāju sit cross-legged in front of the sacrificial fire. In the centre is the *cakraswor guru* to his left the *thakālī jajamān* and to his right the *upādhyāya betāju purohit*. The *cakraswor guru* is the seniormost practising Gubhāju of that *bahā* which traditionally provides the officiating priest for the members of the host *bahā*. As Locke (1975:4) has noted, the *saṅgha* (the initiated male members of a *bahā*) has an hereditary relationship with the priests of another *bahā* who act as *purohit* in all *saṅgha* group rites. The *thakālī* to his right fills the role of *jajamān* or client and is the seniormost male of the host *bahā*'s members. The *upādhyāya betāju* is the next most senior practising Gubhāju of the officiating priests' *bahā* and he acts as assistant with the main duty of reciting the appropriate *sūtras* from the holy books placed in front of him. The three men are also said to represent the three jewels; the Buddha, Dharma and Saṅgha.
- 10 The *yajña*, or fire-offering ritual, is a classic Hindu ritual that has its origins in the Vedic period. It is an integral part of an orthodox Hindu wedding in Nepal. Some strict Newar Buddhists refuse to perform this rite on the grounds that it was introduced into their ceremonies by the iconoclastic Hindu reformer Śaṅkarācārya in order to distort Buddhist rituals. Such purists perform only *kalaśa pūjā* instead. (Locke 1975:20 discusses *kalaśa pūjā* in some detail.)
- 11 These rites are conducted by the girl's priest and his wife. While the priest chants *sūtras* his wife purifies the girls by sprinkling flower petals and rice over their heads and by touching each with a metal thunderbolt (*vajra*) and a metal key. The wife of the seniormost member of the father of the leading girl takes the key in her right hand and with the other end of the key held in the right hand of



the leading girl she conducts the line of hand-holding girls into the *bahī* courtyard and to their allotted places. This welcoming ritual is known as *lasa khusa* (New.) and is common to many Newar ceremonies (Locke 1975:7).

- 12 The *pūjā* items are collectively known as *pūjā jwālā* (New.) and they are carried on a large brass plate called *pūjābha* (New.). Amongst the routine worshipping objects is a clay cup full of rice grains with an arecanut and a coin on top; it is known as *kisali* (New. literally *ki* = rice and *salī* = small clay cup) and after it has been touched on the head of the girl it is given to the *castraswor guru*. The clay cup symbolises earth, the rice grain crops, the arecanut space and the coin population — together they represent the human world. The act of giving the *kisali* to the *guru* constitutes a firm commitment on the girls' part to take the *ihi* initiation.
- 13 These are milk, curd, ghee, urine and dung. Pure water from a sacred river (for Kathmandu this would mean the Vishnumati) is mixed into the *pañcagabya* with 108 stirrings of a metal thunderbolt (*vajra*).
- 14 A *caitya* is a Buddhist funeral monument or reliquary which represents the universe — it is perhaps the most commonly encountered religious structure in Nepal and can vary in size from a tiny rice mound to a huge hemispherical monument.
- 15 Locke (1975:18), in discussing the boys' initiation rites (*bare chuyegu* — New. and *ācā luyegu* — New.) made a similar observation 'Even such a brief survey of these rites shows their authentically Buddhist character'.
- 16 In the Hindu version of *ihi* the girls place the garlands around their necks immediately after the measurement and wear them for the remainder of the first day.
- 17 The rubbing of vermillion into the parting of the girls' hair by the groom is an important part of the adult marriage ceremony (Nepali 1965:227).
- 18 According to Pandey (1972:134) the Sanskrit names of the rite are *prathamavivāha* (first marriage) and *śrīphalavivāha* (the blessed fruit marriage). The blessed fruit is always understood to be the *bīḷva*, i.e. the *byā*.
- 19 Swaminathan and Aryal (1972:3) state that the girls 'are given in marriage to Sun God who is represented by a Bel fruit and thereafter they are free to remarry in the event of widowhood or divorce'. I have not found any supporting evidence for this equation and in fact it seems likely that the authors have confused the *ihi* rite with the subsequent mock-menstrual seclusion at the conclusion of which the girls worship Sūrya.
- 20 See O'Flaherty (1973). Leach (1962) discusses a similar ambiguity in the attitude of Śiva's other son Gaṇeśa.

- 21 Turner (1965:579) in his *Dictionary of the Nepali Language* noted under *saṅkalpa* 'the Newar ceremony of marrying a girl to a *bel*-fruit in order that she may never become a widow'.
- 22 If menarche should begin prior to *bārā tayegu* then the girl is immediately secluded either alone or preferably with some companions. The sequence of events in this solo version (called *bārā chonegu* — New.) is the same as in the group rite.
- 23 Liebert (1976:288) describes Sūrya Nārāyana as a 'syncretistic representation of Sūrya and Śiva'. This may help to explain the otherwise surprising identification of the girls with Parvati, the spouse of Śiva.
- 24 See Bennett 1976a:9-12 and 1976b:191-3 for information on the Brāhman and Chhetri first menstruation rite in Kathmandu valley.
- 25 Informants from some high-ranking Hindu castes stated that menstruating women were strictly prohibited from entering the kitchen. I have, however, little doubt that in this, as in many other matters, the members of such castes were conforming to Parbatya rather than Newar custom.
- 26 The *tālī* rite (*tālīkettukalyanam*) had to take place before puberty and, like the *ihi*, was usually a group rite. The central act of the four day rite was, as is common in marriage rites throughout much of south India, the tying of a gold ornament (*tālī*) around the neck of the girl by a ritual bridegroom. This man had no subsequent rights or obligations and some years later, after the girl's first menstrual seclusion, she entered into conjugal unions known as *sambandham*. See Fuller, 1976, for a good summary of the many descriptive and interpretative accounts in the literature.
- 27 Contemporary Newar society could also be described as exhibiting a number of tribal features. The following are especially worth noting:
  1. *jat* that are structured in conformity with lineage principles, especially in regard to property and leadership. Most *jat* are highly corporate groups with a common estate in land and buildings. *Jat* members have a strong sense of solidarity and even at the highest level participate in joint activities.
  2. *Jat* leadership is well developed and analogous to that found in many tribal communities. I refer here to such formal offices as *thakālī* and *aju* (New.).
  3. Dietary customs of a tribal type, especially meat-eating and alcohol-drinking.

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## CHETRI WOMEN IN DOMESTIC GROUPS AND RITUALS

John N. Gray

### I

It is with some trepidation that I undertake an analysis of Chetri women in Nepalese households and rituals.<sup>1</sup> At the outset I plead guilty to a common ethnographic bias: I talked mostly with men about women and men in the domestic sphere (cf. Ardener 1975:3). In a society where there is overt and formal acknowledgement of the superior status, authority and knowledge of males in both the public and domestic domains (Rosaldo 1974:23) Chetri women tended to withdraw from discussions about the cultural logic of rituals and the social relations among members of their households asserting that their husbands, fathers or brothers knew more about such matters. It appears that this is a common experience among male ethnographers and, according to Ardener (1975), among many female ethnographers as well. This relative inaccessibility of the 'female perspective' is one level — the methodological — on which woman may be seen to constitute an anthropological problem. Ardener argues that the social 'mutedness' of the female model is offset in myth and ritual where women 'acquire in the world of symbolism something like their demographic conspicuity' (1975:5). This is an attractive proposal for one who talked mostly with Chetri men but whose research was focused on ritual symbolism.

While Ardener contends that we can solve this methodological problem through an understanding of the symbolism of myth and ritual, such symbolism raises a further problem about woman: woman is portrayed as benevolent and malevolent, powerful and weak, sublime and primitive, pure and impure, necessary and superfluous, goddess and witch (Rosaldo 1974; Ortner 1974; Denich 1974). The symbolic ambiguity of woman constitutes a problem both on the analytic level of explanation and on the folk level of pragmatic action. With reference to the former level, Ortner explains the 'universal fact of culturally attributed second-class status of woman in every society' (1974:68) and her symbolic ambiguity as implications of a pan-cultural logic which conceives of her body, social roles and psyche as closer to nature thus requiring her to be controlled by culture — the domain unambiguously associated with man. As intermediate between nature and culture (cf. Levi-Strauss 1969) woman symbolically 'may thus appear to stand both above and below (and beside) culture' yet be 'simply outside and around it' (Ortner 1974:85).